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Viewing cable 08RIYADH121, ASHURA IN THE EP: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08RIYADH121	2008-01-30 09:40	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Riyadh

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/06/22/116306/wikileaks-saudi-crackdown-on-shiites.html>

VZCZCXRO4773
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHKUK
DE RUEHRH #0121/01 0300940
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 300940Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7488
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0625
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 0952
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000121

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR DS/IP/ITA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2018
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: ASHURA IN THE EP: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

REF: 07 RIYADH 00231

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL JOHN KINCANNON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)
)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Falling on January 19, 2008, this year's Ashura commemorations in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia continued the trend of the recent past; Qatif-area Shi'a enjoyed increased freedom of expression while the Al-Ahsa community was strictly forbidden from any public commemorations. With SAG security presence at a minimum, Qatifis organized religious events, speeches, plays, processions, and sales of Shi'a memorabilia in increased quantity. The festivities attracted record turnout according to local observers. In contrast, on January 5, al-Ahsa Governor Badr bin Jiluwi expressly forbade sheikhs in that area from organizing any public events. Authorities in al-Ahsa closed down multiple husseiniyyas as a preventative measure, while in the predominantly Shi'a village of Rumailah a contact reported small clashes between young men throwing rocks and police officials that entered the village to remove signs associated with the holiday. Consistent with previous years, there were no public Ashura events in the Dammam/Khobar/Dhahran metro area. Useful as a barometer of the relationship between the Eastern Province Shi'a communities and the SAG, this year's Ashura celebrations leave little doubt that a dual policy has taken shape. END SUMMARY.

QATIF COMMEMORATIONS INCREASE IN NUMBER, PARTICIPATION

¶2. (C) With ConGen Dhahran officers observing Ashura activities in person on 8, 9, and 10 Muharram (NOTE: 10 Muharram is the actual day of Ashura, this year celebrated on January 19. END NOTE) it was quickly apparent that the Saudi security posture in Qatif was not one of confrontation, but rather of compromise and assistance. On each day, Saudi authorities established a checkpoint on the road leading from Qatif highway to the center of the city, although security checks on cars appeared lax. The security presence in central Qatif on 8 Muharram was overt in the form of between 5 and 10 Ministry of Interior (MOI) Special Security Force police cars and uniformed officers on foot around the edges of the approximately square mile area of events. These officers interacted amiably with the crowd, serving as traffic and crowd control for a mass of people in the thousands. Community leaders reported to PolOff the presence of at least two plain-clothed Mabath officers among the crowd (MOI General Intelligence).

¶3. (C) With the exception of the massive crowd control effort required during the Gudaih village Karbala play, security presence was minimal throughout the proceedings. Many events witnessed by ConGen Officers included audiences numbering in the hundreds, and went unsupervised by any uniformed officer (NOTE: Karbala plays are held on 10 Muharram and commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. Gudaih holds the largest play in Qatif, last year estimated at an audience of more than 10,000. It is widely agreed this year's audience was considerably larger than that of last year. END NOTE).

¶4. (C) The community of Awamiyya, referred to locally as "Little Fallujah" and known for its harder edge and supposed propensity for street violence, holds one of the larger Karbala plays in Qatif as well as the only haza (mourning) procession in Saudi Arabia in which participants cut their scalps with swords and march while bleeding (NOTE: In most proceedings, "hazis" rhythmically beat their chests with their hands, while in the community of Aujam they flagellate themselves using metal chains. Awamiyya's procession is considered the most extreme, but is paradoxically the only one witnessed by ConGen officers in which a procession of women, scalps uncut, followed the men. END NOTE).

¶5. (C) To assure that all logistical and security precautions were in place, young men in Awamiyya organized security posts and officers, wearing badges and neon-colored vests to identify themselves and using two-way radios to communicate. These security efforts were better organized than previous,

less formal plans which led to an incident last year in which three unofficial mutawa (religious police) - private Salafi citizens that locals believe were unaffiliated with the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) - attempted to enter the Awamiyya proceedings and were beaten by local youth (COMMENT: Qatif contacts believe that "Wahhabis" seek to gain access to such Ashura events to confront participants, or record the proceedings for the purpose of then campaigning against the Shi'a as unbelievers.

For this reason, some security presence is often welcomed by the Qatif community, to ensure that any who would wish to incite violence are prevented from attending. END COMMENT). Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr delivered the opening speech to the Karbala play in Awamiyya, this following his 9 Muharram (January 18) speech calling for the creation of a United Opposition Front to challenge the SAG (septel).

¶16. (C) An example of the increasingly free atmosphere that Qatif Shi'a enjoyed was a new event in the Qatif-area town of Safwa. Though a procession of thousands of hazis had been refused permission to march down the main road of Safwa (they instead marched down side roads without issue), the government did not stop the community from organizing a new event area that included a sand sculpture, an artistic area for calligraphy and Ashura-themed paintings/drawings, a tent area with a video feed for lectures, and a tent for educating children on the meaning of Ashura (NOTE: PolOff was informed by event organizers that the satellite connection was used to provide religious lectures from participants in Iraq. END NOTE). As with many celebrations, food was cooked and shared for free with event guests. One of the organizers told PolOff that the Mabahith had intervened when on 2 Muharram (January 10) the group began setting up tents without permission. Reportedly, after a meeting in the Dammam General Intelligence office, all issues were resolved, and the Safwa residents were free to continue with their new commemoration event. Sheikh Mohammad Hassan, presiding over the Safwa event, spoke to PolOff about the need of SAG security to allow peaceful commemorations such as that one, particularly when repression of such events might lead to conflict.

WHAT IS THE MESSAGE?

¶17. (C) Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, generally recognized as Qatif's most prominent religious figure, consistently attracted the largest audiences to his lectures with parking lots swelling and overflow crowds sitting in the streets outside of husseiniyyas during his speeches. The thousands in attendance were only a small number compared to those who watched al-Saffar on satellite channel al-Kothar, or downloaded his speeches from www.saffar.org (NOTE: Local contacts informed ConGen Officers that several Qatif-area events were covered by non-Saudi media including Iranian television station "Al Sahar," and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council's network "Al Forat." END NOTE). Leader of the "Shirazi" faction of the EP and long a proponent of non-violent partnership with the SAG, al-Saffar continued to stress reform within the context of the Saudi state. However, this did not stop him from highlighting the need for greater Shi'a/SAG cooperation. Pointing out that many Saudis accuse the United States of trying to separate the EP from greater Saudi Arabia, Saffar said that the greatest force causing any such separatism is intolerant Sunnis who force Shi'a to feel as unwanted foreigners in their own country. The number of signs expressing support for Lebanese Hezbollah and Hassan Nasrallah was less than last year, the previous year's surge tied to the Israeli-Hezbollah clash of summer 2006 (reftel), but ConGen officers did observe children wearing Nasrallah shirts and his books were readily available in Ashura markets. Contacts also reported that Hezbollah satellite television station "Al-Manar" covered Ashura events in Qatif. Additionally of note was the increase from last year in Iran-related paraphernalia on display in the Ashura markets, from Iranian flag headbands for children, to books on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

¶8. (C) While Qatif enjoyed greater freedom of religious expression, the SAG prevented al-Ahsa from any public commemorations. Post contacts report that on January 5, 2008, al-Ahsa regional Governor Badr bin-Jiluwi called a meeting of approximately 30 Hasawi sheikhs to warn them against organizing or supporting any public Ashura events. The al-Ahsa municipal police then forcibly closed multiple husseiniyyas, including that of Mohammed al-Harz, a well-known Hasawi Shi'a whose husseiniyya had operated for thirty-five years. The closed husseiniyyas were advised to remain closed until further notice. While the January 5 meeting and increased police patrolling dissuaded the vast majority of Shi'a in al-Ahsa from any public demonstrations, residents of the Rumailah village resisted. Prominent al-Ahsa human rights activist and member of the National Society for Human Rights Mohammed al-Jubran reported that throughout the first 10 days of Muharram, there were small clashes between youth in Rumailah, who hung banners and erected flags, and the security forces that would come to remove such displays.

¶9. (C) Al-Jubran reports that the tenor of such resistance and demonstrations has become more strident, as Hasawis continue to receive what they feel is unequal treatment. Some of the banners posted in Rumailah called for a "renewed intifada," and contacts reported that the chatter always constant in the Hasawi Shi'a community had taken a decidedly harsher tone in recent weeks. A commemoration of the intifada of 1979 - an uprising of Eastern Province Shi'a sparked by popular enthusiasm for the ideals of the Iranian Revolution - has been a recurring theme in the EP Shi'a community during past weeks, exemplified by the Shi'a website www.rasid.com running regular pieces discussing the importance of the intifada, going so far as to even post pictures of those killed in the uprisings. Al-Jubran reported that while there were 48 total Ashura-related arrests in al-Ahsa last year, there are no reported arrests thus far this year. He did add though that it is still much too early to compare, as Saudi authorities will often wait one to two months before making arrests in cases of unauthorized religious celebration.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: There is no doubt that the work by the Shirazi leadership in Qatif, some of whom are part of the Qatif Municipal Council, has paid dividends in the latitude granted to the community to handle its own affairs. Building on new autonomy such as the budgetary authority gained by the Qatif Municipal Council in 2007, this year's Ashura events were extremely well-attended in spite of cold temperatures. Event organizers in each of the villages visited reported crowds equal to if not bigger than in years past. As a consequence of this greater liberty, Qatifis generally acknowledge progress by the SAG in granting equality to all citizens and reflect an understanding that reform is a slow process. This starkly contrasts with opinions in al-Ahsa, where contacts describe a growing wave of negative reaction to increased SAG repression and warn of "consequences" to repressive tactics. Mohammed al-Jubran told PolOff that while he is often able to help aggrieved young people find an avenue by which to air their grievances through formal channels, he worries about the increasing number of young people unable to access such channels who may instead voice their protests in other ways. END COMMENT

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
GFOELLER